The Impact of Religious Intensification on Family Relations: A South African Example

Using the example of South African Jewish families in which the daughters became Ultra-Orthodox, this article examines the reactions and adaptations of mothers to their daughters’ religious intensification. A qualitative study in which 15 mothers and 15 daughters were interviewed found that the mothers’ initial reactions were primarily positive and ambivalent, with some negative reactions, but over time the mothers became increasingly ambivalent. Overall, mothers and newly observant adult daughters made serious efforts to maintain family cohesion and relationships of mutual respect. The results are explained by the South African context, stress theory, the concept of family resilience, and intergenerational theory.

The intensification of religious identification and observance among members of major religious groupings has become a notable phenomenon in Western society. Such a development is likely to affect relations in families in which one or some of the members substantially change the level of their religious intensity. Nonetheless, the social science literature has given limited attention to the way in which families are affected by religion (Houseknecht & Pankhurst, 2000; Marciano, 1987). This article focuses on mother-daughter relations following the adult daughter’s becoming “reborn” within the same faith in which she was raised so as to intensify her religious identification, commitment, and observance. This change subjects the adult child to an authority system and places her in social settings that diverge from those in which she was raised and to which her parent may still adhere. When the child adopts customs and practices that the parent perceives as unusual and the child refuses to participate in usual activities, it is highly probable that family relations will be adversely affected.

The specific study to be described here was designed to examine the reactions and adaptations of mothers to their adult daughters’ change from relatively moderate to fervent (“Ultra-Orthodox”) observance of Judaism. It is a part of a cross-cultural inquiry investigating and comparing the phenomenon among South Africans, Americans, and Israelis. The South African example is presented here. The authors were able to obtain family histories and compare mothers’ and daughters’ reactions to this occurrence. We preface this report with a description of religious intensification among contemporary Jews.

Teshuva: Return With Repentance

The last few decades have witnessed the return of a sector of the Jewish population to the practice
of strict, Orthodox Judaism (Aviad, 1983; Danzger, 1989; Davidman, 1991; Kaufman, 1991). The Hebrew word *teshuvah*, used to describe this phenomenon, suggests that the returnee is repentant and wants to repair his or her ways. Scholarly discussions of *ba’alei teshuvah* (those who return, masculine plural form) have focused primarily on Americans and Israelis, even though Jews from other parts of the world also have strengthened their loose ties to Judaism and have become religious (Aviad; Danzger, 1998, 2000). Research topics include the recruitment process (Shaffir, 1983), the role of *ba’alei teshuvah* religious learning institutions (yeshivas for men and seminaries for women; Aviad; Danzger, 1989), and comparisons between different sectors of returnees (Davidman, 1991) and between male and female modern Orthodox *ba’alei teshuvah* (Davidman & Greil, 1993). A recent article on the rebirth of Judaism in Kiev noted that mothers, but not fathers, of children who have become newly religious in the former Soviet Union tend to follow their children into traditional practices of Judaism (Danzger, 2000).

Research conducted in the United States and Israel suggests that when young adults become religious, relations with the families of origin may become destabilized. Kaufman’s (1991) qualitative study of 150 newly Orthodox women in five American urban areas found that *ba’alot teshuvah* (women who return) often are estranged from their families of origin. This occurs despite their attraction to Orthodoxy because of its profamily values (Kaufman). Likewise Aviad (1983) showed that a child’s intensified Jewish observance produces strain in relations between parents and children. Adult children’s distancing themselves from their parents by moving to a religious neighborhood or refusing to eat at their parents’ home challenges the family’s sense of cohesion and impedes family celebrations, which usually involve food (Danzger, 1989). (According to the laws of *kashrut*, any meat prepared and served in one’s home must have been slaughtered in a special way and certified as acceptable. Almost all food must be approved as kosher. Separate sets of dishes and cutlery are required for serving meat and dairy meals. Jewish individuals and religious communities vary in their interpretation of and the degree to which they observe these laws.) However disturbing the posture of the *ba’alei teshuvah* may be to parents, it also creates a conflict for returnees. It is difficult for them to adhere to the obligation that they honor their parents while living up to other religious requirements that parents are violating or not observing with equal stringency (cf. Becher & Newman, 1994; Danzger, 1989).

**SENSITIZING LITERATURE, CONCEPTS, AND THEORIES**

As a qualitative study that is open to the emergence of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), this research did not begin with a particular theoretical perspective. During the course of this study, the investigators considered a variety of potentially relevant bodies of literature, concepts, and theories that would sensitize them to the situation of South African *ba’alot teshuvah* and their families. The following were most informative.

**The Impact of Religious Change on the Family**

Research on young people who join cults has posed a “family deprivation hypothesis.” Young individuals, previously alienated from their families of origin, seek a family substitute in a new religious community (Kilbourne & Richardson, 1982; Schwartz & Kaslow, 1982). The focus on the family as the “cause” of the child’s decision diverts attention from family members’ reactions and adaptations. Researchers who have looked beyond the child’s motivation have found that many disapproving families maintained relationships with their children (Wright & Piper, 1986). Furthermore, cults vary in their attitudes, with some encouraging recruits to cut ties with their families and others accepting involvement with families (Marciano, 1987). A study that examined parent-child relations among adults who converted from Christianity to Judaism and married born Jews—less extreme than a child’s joining a cult but more extreme than his or her becoming Ultra-Orthodox—found that parents who learned about Judaism become less negative over time and adapted to and accepted their child’s decision (Huberman, 1981).

**Stress Theory**

From the perspective of stress theory, a daughter’s religious intensification may be experienced as a stressor that activates or evokes anxiety, depression, or other psychological or behavioral reactions. Individuals respond to a stressor by appraising whether it is benign, harmful, threatening, or challenging and determining how they might cope (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping, the manage-
ment of problems and emotions associated with the stressor, can moderate the severity of the stress response (Lazarus & Folkman). Some stress theorists use the term adaptation to describe the response to a stressor (Selye, 1976), which can involve family reorganization over time (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). Recent conceptualizations of stress theory recognize that stressful situations can generate positive as well as negative affect (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000). Folkman and Moskowitz recommended that investigators use qualitative methods to capture the nuances of this neglected dimension of stress.

The Concept of Family Resilience

A parallel concept within the family field to positive affect as a response to stress is that of family resilience. McCubbin and McCubbin (1988) defined this as “Characteristics, dimensions and properties of families which help families to be resistant to disruption in the face of change and adaptive in the face of crisis situations” (p. 247). Silliman (1994) suggested that resilience can be described at separate but interdependent individual, family, and community levels. Family capacities to cope, endure, and survive are a source of family adaptation to stress (McCubbin, McCubbin, & Thompson, 1993). According to Hawley and DeHaan (1996),

Family resilience describes the path a family follows as it adapts and prospers in the face of stress, both in the present and over time. Resilient families respond positively to these conditions in unique ways, depending on the context, developmental level, the interactive combination of risk factors and the shared family outlook. (p. 298)

This definition suggests that families are able to grow and thrive in response to certain types and ranges of stressors and that families may adapt at different points of the life cycle. Risk and protective factors can mediate this adaptive process.

Intergenerational Family Relations and the Concept of Ambivalence

Theories about personality development highlight individual autonomy and independence but, when one considers family relations when the child becomes an adult, intergenerational interdependence is a more appropriate concept (Cohler, 1983). Parents and adult children need mutual support during adulthood, although in degrees and ways that differ from that which was provided when the children were young. Summarizing the literature on developmental aging, Glass, Bengtson, and Dunham (1986) observed that when children assume adult roles and exert reciprocal influences on their parents, the balance in the influence of parents on children changes, compared with the influence of children on parents. According to the developmental or generational stake theory (Acoc & Bengtson, 1971; Bengtson & Kuypers, 1971), each generation is invested in maintaining solidarity and the relational bond, but younger people seek to maximize their separateness, whereas older adults seek to maximize continuity. For this reason, older adults may report higher levels of relational closeness and similarities in values than their adult children report (Marshall, 1995). Although such contradictory generational foci may be described as a source of intergenerational conflict, Luescher and Pillemer (1998) would prefer ambivalence, rather than solidarity or conflict, as an organizing concept at both the social structural and individual level. The notion of intergenerational ambivalence directs investigators’ attention to the management of conflict, particularly during transitional periods (Luescher & Pillemer).

This article aims to illuminate mothers’ responses to a major challenge to their lifestyles, values, and beliefs through their daughters’ decision to become Ultra-Orthodox. The term religious intensification refers to the strengthening of religious commitment and the increasing the stringency of religious practices. The term reactions refers to emotion-based responses that may be expressed in attitudes, evaluative statements, and behaviors. Adaptations are changes implemented in behaviors, in attitudes, and in one’s environment in consideration of the religious intensification and reactions. Coping refers to the emotional and behavioral means that family members use in their effort to live with the changed situation of intensification, reactions, and adaptations. The latter three concepts, derived from stress theory, are used in the following research questions:

- How do mothers of ba’alot teshuvah react initially to their daughters’ religious intensification?
- How do the mothers subsequently adapt to and cope with any discrepancies between their daughters’ and their own lifestyles, value orientations, and religious observances as they encounter them?
● How are mother-daughter relationships affected by the daughters’ religious intensification and adaptations?

**METHOD**

The study used a qualitative, exploratory approach that (a) sought to collect data in naturalistic settings, (b) studied participants’ perceptions and the meanings they construct, and (c) used the researchers’ own perspectives and reactions to these perceptions and meanings as research tools (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tutty, Rothery, & Grinnell, 1996).

Multiple methods to study the same phenomenon were used as a means of triangulation. In qualitative research, “triangulation” involves identifying commonalities and differences across different data sources, investigators, theories, or a combination thereof (Denzin, 1989). The data sources of this study included interviews with mothers and daughters and a review of literature related to the South African Jewish context. Multiple investigator perspectives were obtained through a research team consisting of Israeli, South African, and American women, faculty and graduate students, located at different points across the religious-secular spectrum. Team members included ba’alot teshuvah, persons who were religious from birth, a mother of a ba’al teshuvah, and mothers who raised their children religiously or secularly. The diverse membership on the team made it possible for us to have among ourselves insider and outsider perspectives, so valuable in the conduct of qualitative research (Sands & McClelland, 1994). The team cooperated in the formulation of research questions, in the conduct of a pilot study, in refining research questions, in data collection and analysis, and in theory building. Interviews for this study were conducted in South Africa and Israel, mostly by two female team members who were born in South Africa, one secular and the other a ba’al teshuvah. Theoretical triangulation was accomplished by becoming sensitized to potentially relevant theories throughout the project (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and by determining which of these theories and concepts, as well as others that emerged, fit the data while writing and revising the manuscript.

**Participants**

The criteria for participation were that the daughters (a) identified themselves as Ultra-Orthodox ba’alot teshuvah, (b) were married (because marriage generally represents a commitment to the adopted religiously intense lifestyle), and (c) had mothers who had not been strictly Orthodox in practice for most of their daughters’ childhood years and were living in South Africa. We discovered during data gathering in South Africa that there was a pattern of residential movement of daughters back and forth between South Africa and Israel and frequent visiting with parents in both locations. In keeping with our naturalistic research approach, we decided to include families in which the religious daughter lived in Israel as well as in South Africa.

A South African interviewer recruited participants in South Africa with the assistance of a rabbi engaged in outreach to Jews exploring their religion. He provided the interviewer with a list of ba’alot teshuvah daughters, who resided in Johannesburg and were affiliated with different social networks within the Ultra-Orthodox community, and their mothers. From this initial list, the interviewer used the snowball method to obtain names of additional mothers and daughters living in South Africa. The final sample consisted of 30 individuals, half mothers and half daughters. Among these were 11 pairs of biologically related mothers and daughters and 4 mothers and 4 daughters who were unrelated to one another. When we encountered a mother who declined to participate or who was interviewed but her daughter could not be located, we replaced the missing member of the pair with a person of the same relational status. We did this to encompass the perspectives of families with potential difficulties around a child’s becoming religious, which could lead to one member of a dyad’s refusing to be interviewed. Thus, we were able to directly interview 15 mothers and 15 daughters. Because the four mothers and four daughters who were not part of related dyads provided information about their respective daughters and mothers who were not interviewed, we were able to obtain information on 19 different family systems (11 + 4 + 4). This sample allowed us to examine individual mothers and daughters, related dyads, and family systems.

For the entire sample of mothers and daughters interviewed or described by one family member, the 19 ba’alot teshuvah daughters were from 24 to 43 years of age (M = 31) and had from zero to five children (M = 2.7). At least 11 had some higher education or had graduated from college, and eight were working at the time of their inter-
view. Seven of the *ba’alot teshuvah*’s spouses had professional degrees (doctor, lawyer, dentist, optometrist, engineer), although several were not practicing their professions while they were pursuing advanced religious studies in learning academies called *kollels*. The *ba’alot teshuvah* in the sample were oldest (nine), middle (six), and youngest (four) children. The mothers of the *ba’alot teshuvah* whose ages were revealed (about half of them) ranged from 47 to 68. Eight mothers were currently working (four with their husbands). Fourteen had intact first marriages, four were divorced (two of these remarried), and one was widowed and remarried. The mothers had from two to five children (M = 3.2). Their husbands were predominantly professionals (in law, pharmacy, engineering, psychiatry) and businessmen. The related dyads and unrelated mothers and daughters, all of whom are included in this study, had similar distributions of sociodemographic characteristics except for residence. Six of the eight families from the unmatched sample, but 5 of the 11 related dyads had *ba’alot teshuvah* daughters living in Israel.

This sample is similar demographically to the South African Jewish population, which is relatively well educated and fares well economically, working largely in professional and managerial spheres (Arkin, 1984; DellaPergola & Dubb, 1988; Kosmin, Goldberg, Shain, & Bruk, 1999). Between 1970 and 1990, when the political situation in South Africa was becoming increasingly unstable, the size of the Jewish population decreased, with an extensive out-migration to Israel, Australia, and other Western countries, and an increase in the divorce rate (DellaPergola, 1997; DellaPergola & Dubb).

### Procedure

Interview questions were developed by the research team and pretested, following training in interviewing, in Israel. Mothers and daughters were asked to respond to similar questions, each from her own perspective. Twenty open-ended questions explored family history and composition, religious upbringing, expectations, family relationships, the process of becoming religious, the reactions of different family members to one becoming religious, life-cycle events, children (and grandchildren), difficulties, coping with difficulties, supports, and strengths. Participants gave oral consent for interviews to be audio taped.

### Results

#### Mothers’ Initial Reactions to the Daughters’ Religious Intensification

Seven of the nineteen mothers’ initial reactions to their daughters’ religious intensification were mostly positive, four mostly negative, and eight ambivalent (see Table 1).

**Positive reactions.** Mothers who reported being,
for the most part, pleased felt that their daughters were doing the right thing, or at least the right thing for the daughters or the daughters’ family situations. One of these daughters (Gila) was described as having shown signs of being spiritual from an early age. When Gila stated that she wanted to keep kosher, her mother thought, “Deep inside I know that’s the right route for her.” Carol’s mother, who had been attending classes on the Jewish religion (shiurim) at the time both her son and daughter became religious during their joint trip to Israel, reported her first reaction as follows:

I was actually very pleased because when I started going, I never thought it, I never dreamed, of them becoming as involved as they have. But I thought I definitely wanted them to know their roots and learn how to feel comfortable with it. The fact that I have never felt comfortable, I wanted them to be able to feel comfortable. So for me it was positive.

Two other mothers indicated that they were relieved to see their children find stability in religion. Both of these daughters were described as difficult and rebellious as teenagers.

Negative reactions. Mothers whose initial reactions were mostly negative communicated worry, fear, anger, guilt, and distress. One described her early images of her daughter’s world as “ugly, black, horrible, smelly.” Others were dismayed by the external changes they saw. Upon becoming religious, the daughters joined communities that expected strict observance of religious laws and conformity in personal appearance, dress, and speech. For example, to observe the rules of modesty, Ultra-Orthodox women wear long skirts and long-sleeved blouses, which their mothers perceived as unattractive. Married women cover their hair with shaitels (wigs) or tichels (scarves). Alison’s mother said that it was difficult for her to accept her daughter’s “hiding her hair and wearing a shaitel, which is not as comfortable, not as easy . . . the shaitel becomes a big thing because you are just not used to it.” Similarly, Helen’s mother recalled:

And she had this beautiful bathing costume, it was so sexy . . . and then the gate rang and it was somebody. She ran inside, put on this dress up to here and down to there, and put a shaitel on. She transformed from a beautiful girl of 25 to an old bag of 50. That’s what she looked like, and I hated that.

Although these mothers had some familiarity with Orthodoxy through religious grandparents and great-grandparents, they were not conversant with particulars of Ultra-Orthodox practice and feared that this lifestyle would introduce a barrier in their relations with their daughters and grandchildren and impede their daughters’ families’ social and economic opportunities.

Confirming her mother’s self-report of initial difficulty, Alison stated that her mother was worried that she was “getting involved with something that was going to limit her and close her in, and she was going to lose all her opportunities.” Similarly, Tina said that her mother was concerned that being religious would interfere “with what she saw as my development as a woman.” Rina’s mother was worried that her daughter was doing it for her boyfriend, who later became her husband, and that it was not “coming from within.” She also worried that her “free-spirited” daughter would not be able to cope with the “restrictions of religion.” Helen’s mother, who was the most negative of all the participants, said that she observed her daughter moving in the direction of becoming religious when she was going with the man she married but did not realize until soon after the marriage, when her daughter put on a shaitel, how extreme they were in their practices. This mother was familiar with and had herself rebelled against the Orthodoxy of the Jewish orphanage in which she was raised.

Ambivalent reactions. The eight initially ambivalent mothers had concerns that were similar to those of both the mostly positive and the mostly negative mothers. Beth’s mother, whose son had left Judaism for another religion, was grateful that her daughter remained in the fold. Nonetheless, her interview revealed negative feelings about her daughter’s lifestyle and disappointment that her son-in-law was not a professional. Fran’s mother, who found it difficult when her daughter and son-in-law refused to join the extended family for Friday night Sabbath dinners, was nevertheless impressed with her daughter’s family’s “beautiful way of life” and was comforted by the expectation that the grandchildren will “be brought up with the right values and standards.” Irene’s mother, whose daughter and sons became religious together over a period of years, initially “thought they were crazy” and was also upset that the children would not have dinner with the extended family on Friday nights. But because the children were sensitive to their parents’ feelings,
“it wasn’t terribly difficult.” Furthermore, like Paula’s mother, she was happy that her daughter, who seemed to have had a difficult time finding herself during adolescence and early adulthood, was moving into a stable lifestyle. On the other hand, Paula’s mother complained about her daughter’s wearing a shaitel and not wearing pants anymore.

Regardless of whether the mothers were positive, negative, or ambivalent, all discussed the initial impact of their daughters’ teshuvah on the family’s practice of kashruth. Those families that were already kosher were disturbed at their daughters’ consternation that their mothers’ standards were not sufficiently high. Other families considered becoming kosher. Differences related to kosher food affected family cohesion, because, as mentioned above, religious daughters were no longer willing to attend Sabbath dinners and Jewish holiday celebrations where the food was not kosher. (Another reason for nonattendance was distance. The daughters, following religious law, halakhah, would not drive on the Sabbath or holidays.) As one of the mothers explained, “For many of our Jewish community members, religion was being together with the family—Friday nights dinners.” These dinners included extended family and could take place at relatives’ homes, so other relations also were affected. In placing the family at the center and religious law at the periphery, the parents’ priorities were different from those of their religious children.

Concerns about kashruth also affected relations with grandchildren. Two of the daughters would not leave their children with their parents over an extended period of time out of fear that their parents would serve inappropriate food. At the same time, grandmothers were concerned that differences over kosher food might make their grandchildren disrespectful of them. Talking about her grandson, aged 6, Helen’s mother related, “So I take out a Crunchie [South African chocolate] and I give it to him. He says, ‘No thanks, Granny, that isn’t kosher’. . . . goes home, [and] he says, ‘You know, Mummy, Granny’s so dumb because she gave me a Crunchie.’”

Seven of the mothers spoke about financial issues. Although at least seven of the sons-in-law had professional degrees and another was a college graduate, six were kollel students, who were not generating much income beyond modest support from religious institutions. As one mother said, “It was very upsetting for us to think that our son-in-law is studying only for the sake of studying, that he would not be able to support [our daughter].” Even though eight of the ba’alot teshuvah worked, they were not employed in lucrative fields. The financial situation of the daughters placed a demand on the families of origin to provide financial support. Six of the mothers mentioned that they and their husbands, their former husbands, or the in-laws were sending money to their children on a regular basis.

The Adaptation of the Mothers of Ba’alot Teshuvah Over Time

Time allowed the mothers to experience the positive and negative consequences of their daughters’ teshuvah for themselves, for their extended family, and, in particular, for their grandchildren. Over time the mothers were able to increase their knowledge of Jewish law, gain understanding of the Ultra-Orthodox practices their daughters had embraced, and attempt to cope with the changed situation.

As Table 1 shows, after a time, 5 mothers had become or remained positive, 2 were negative, and 12 were ambivalent. Among the seven who were initially positive, four remained positive, and three became ambivalent. Of the four who were mostly negative in the beginning, two remained in that position, whereas one of the other three became positive and one became ambivalent. Remarkably, the ambivalent category increased from 8 to 12; 7 of the 12 had remained in this category, 3 had shifted from the mostly positive position, and 1 had shifted from the mostly negative position. Regardless of whether they remained in the same category or shifted, their reported feelings became more intense over time.

Remained positive or became positive. Those mothers who continued to be positive had, initially, been receptive to religiosity themselves or had other children who became religious. Adaptation for them was consistent with what was happening in the family. These mothers coped by narrowing the gap between them and their daughters in their own religious practices. They did this by increasing their knowledge of Orthodoxy, refraining from working or cooking on the Sabbath, and keeping or upgrading their levels of kashruth. Their daughters described these mothers as open, understanding, and accepting.

Over time, these positive mothers grew to agree on the benefits to their daughters’ families of strict adherence to Judaism. For example, Car-
ol’s mother said that religion provides a strong basis for marriage and raising children:

In this day and age . . . I think it’s such a good way to go because you’ve got the basics of human relationships and for bringing up children. I think in the secular world, it’s just too tough. Here at least, I mean, morals at least will be the way they’re supposed to be. They’re gonna have guidelines, they’ve got rabbis to speak to, to get advice . . . . I think it’s that husbands are more aware of what marriage means . . . [and] just from a marriage point of view, I think that it gives a marriage a chance.

Nina’s mother, who had become observant herself when her daughter was 17, found her more religious daughter an inspiration:

When we visit there [a religious community in Israel] and we’re in that environment, I think it does influence us. We see it’s very good . . . I feel it’s right . . . and it works. I see the caring of people. I see a life that’s really, everyone should just aspire to be able to live that way. It’s wonderful. And I come back very sort of inspired by them all, and I really feel I’ve got to try harder.

Although all the grandmothers adored their grandchildren, Gila’s mother captured their feelings: “So exciting, my God, it’s just the best thing—it’s like falling in love.”

Remained negative. One mother who was negative from the beginning and became more so had lived through a particularly painful situation. Since her daughter had become religious and married, the daughter had lost two children from a childhood disease. Although these deaths strengthened the daughter’s religious faith, they had the opposite effect on her mother. This mother-daughter pair spoke to each other by telephone several times a day but did not see each other very often. They coped by adopting a close-conflictual style of interaction, in which they were openly critical of each other. The other negative mother was described by her daughter, Sherry, who lived in Israel, as keeping her distance. This mother did not make efforts to accommodate to her daughter, resulting in Sherry’s unwillingness to leave her children with her parents.

Remained or became ambivalent. The mothers who remained or became ambivalent over time added additional concerns to their initial foci. Beth’s mother, who said that she accepted her daughter because “she’s found her happiness,” was troubled by her daughter’s restricted lifestyle and worried that her grandchildren’s lives will be limited.

The children are kept . . . like in a ghetto. They can’t see the world around them. They’ve gone back [pause] 100 years, maybe 200 years. They’re living in the little shtetl [Yiddish word for a small village of traditional Jews, especially in Europe] and behaving like it . . . [you’re] not allowed to do this, you’re not allowed to do [that]. They haven’t adapted themselves to modern ways.

Because the Ultra-Orthodox do not use birth control without the permission of a rabbi, two mothers worried that their children will be burdened with too many children.

Two of the mothers who were ambivalent over time coped by accommodating despite their own reservations. These mothers made their homes kosher so that their children would eat there, but at the same time they were critical of their daughters’ lifestyles. Two other mothers did not accommodate while they continued to feel ambivalent. These mothers did not make their homes kosher and maintained their pattern of eating in nonkosher restaurants. In one such family, in which it was customary for the mother and daughters to meet for lunch once a week, the ba’alot teshuvah daughter, Kathy, accommodated by carrying a sack lunch. Although Lynn’s mother was disturbed that her daughter would not eat at her home or permit the grandchildren to ride with their grandparents on the Sabbath, flexibility on both sides ameliorated the situation. Lynn remarked that although she was raising her children strictly Orthodox, she believes “it is a blessing to an extent that we’ve got the secular balance of our grandparents and sisters” so that when her children are older they can “make a choice themselves at least.”

Regardless of the difficulties and how they coped, all the participants gave primacy to maintaining the family relationship. As one mother stated, “the most important thing is I didn’t want to lose my daughter. To me she’s very precious and our relationship is very precious.” Another said, “We still remember families of our past generations torn apart by the Holocaust. We have to keep together.” Even daughters whose mothers became increasingly ambivalent reported improvement in family relations. Considering the significance of family cohesion, an examination of
the evolution of mother-daughter relationships is central to this inquiry.

**The Impact of the Daughters’ Religious Intensification on the Mother-Daughter Relationship**

During the interviews, the mothers and daughters were asked to describe their relationship before the daughter’s religious intensification and following it. For this analysis, we include only the 11 related dyads so that we might compare the information provided by mothers and their daughters. We found that 10 of mothers described their initial relationship with their daughters as positive (good, close, and very close), and one said it was conflictual. Seven of the mothers believed that their relationships remained positive, and four said that they became closer. Relationships were positive despite the mothers’ ambivalence, criticism, or frustration at the daughter’s behavior. From the daughters’ perspective, we found that prior to teshuvah, six reported positive relationships (good to very close) with their mothers, four described their relationships as distant or conflictual, and one did not provide enough information to assess the prior relationship. After teshuvah, 5 of the 11 daughters reported that relations were positive, five said relations became closer, and one said that she and her mother remained distant. From the perspectives of both mothers and daughters, overall relationships either remained positive or improved.

Nevertheless, this development was rationalized differently by mothers and daughters. Six of the mothers attributed positive or improved relations to mutual acceptance, the ability to discuss things openly, and recognition that their daughters were separate individuals. Only two of the daughters made similar statements. Seven of the daughters attributed improvement or maintenance of positive relations to the religious change, Jewish family values, and the influence of rabbis. Only three of the mothers came to such a conclusion. Thus, whereas Alison’s mother said, “Our relationship changed. It is a close relationship now. . . . I am the initiator of open conversations regarding our feelings and misunderstanding,” Alison stated, “Now the relations are good and solid and I see it’s largely due to *Yiddishkeit* [Jewishness], because the principles are so good and provide one with such a good basis.” Similarly, Gila’s mother reported that her daughter’s becoming religious has made the relationship with her “even stronger” because they are “into feelings” and talking their differences through. Gila noted that since she became religious, “‘the truth’ [religion] is responsible for the improvement in the relationship as well as the fact that we spend Shabbat [the Sabbath] and holidays together.”

Lynn’s mother perceived the improvement as due to her daughter’s learning “to accept her mother as she is and even if she doesn’t, she [has] learned to handle it.” Lynn, on the other hand, reported that despite differences, she has maintained a good relationship with her parents because of the rabbi’s influence. “The rabbi told us that we should remember that our parents were there first and God does not want you to offend your parents in pleasing Him.” Interestingly, all the daughters within dyads that became closer over time were described as being unhappy, rebellious, isolated, or lost before becoming religious.

**DISCUSSION**

This study found that, on the whole, mothers and daughters were able to honor both religious and familial obligations despite emerging intergenerational differences. It showed that, within the limits of this sample and the degree of cultural change experienced in this setting, adults with strong convictions were able to be true to their beliefs and express their disapproval of each other while they found ways to ensure family cohesion and mutual respect.

Our findings run counter to the “family deprivation hypothesis” that attributes young people’s religious change to alienation from their families (Kilbourne & Richardson, 1982) and contradict the expectation of a permanent family disruption following adult children’s adherence to a religious faith perceived as extreme (Schwartz & Kaslow, 1982). Like Wright and Piper (1986), who studied the family relations of young adults who joined cults, we found that family deprivation was not evident in most of the *ba’alot teshuvah* families and that families were able to remain in close contact with and support their children despite differences.

The families’ remarkable ability to adapt to their daughters’ religious intensification and ensure family cohesion can be explained in a number of ways. First of all, most of the families in this study were intact and close. Cohesiveness seemed to be valued by mothers and daughters alike, who worked at preserving it. Second, the
specific South African context should be considered. In this ethnically defined society, being a member of the Jewish community rather than observing the Jewish religion is an important marker of cultural identity (Dubb, 1977; Hellig, 1986; Sokolsky, 1980). In comparison with the United States, where Jews blend in with the White society without difficulty, South African Jews assimilate economically but less so socially, residually, and religiously (G. Gundle, personal communication, July 1, 1998). An additional explanation related to the South African context lies in the political upheaval that occurred in South Africa during the last few decades and the massive out-migration and increased divorce rate that the Jewish community was experiencing (DellaPergola, 1997; DellaPergola & Dubb, 1988). In the face of these threats to family cohesion, the families were willing to do whatever they could to preserve family relations.

The role of the daughters’ rabbis in reinforcing family cohesion was significant and recognized as such by both the participants and the interviewers in this study. The advice the rabbis gave the ba’alot teshuvah about maintaining family relations, “God does not want you to offend your parents in pleasing Him,” underlines the importance of respecting parents within Jewish religious law. Few religious cults espouse such a profamily ideology (Marciano, 1987). The rabbis’ interpretation of this law was that daughters should not press parents to make changes in their lives and that the daughters should accommodate parents as much as possible. Interestingly, many of the mothers did make changes in their own religious practices without prodding from their daughters. The daughters’ attitude and respect—as well as the arrival of grandchildren—may have helped lower some of the mothers’ initial negativity and opened the way for them to explore Judaism.

Another explanation for the sustained family cohesion was that mothers and daughters were operating from the same religious base, not different religions, thus their differences were in the meaning and extensiveness of their practices. As mentioned earlier, the focus of the parent generation was on Judaism as a basis for their cultural identity. Even though most South African Jews are nonobservant (Hellig, 1986), 70% affiliate with Orthodox synagogues (Kosmin et al., 1999), and about 75% of the Jewish school-age children attend Jewish day schools (Shain, 1997). Except for religious schools run by the Ultra-Orthodox, Jewish day schools in South Africa emphasize secular Zionism, the Hebrew language, and Jewish history rather than the strict practice of the Jewish religion (Gundle, personal communication, 1998).

Like many other South African Jews, the mothers in this study engaged selectively in some traditional practices (DellaPergola & Dubb, 1988; Dubb, 1977; Hellig, 1984; Kaplan, 1996). To the daughters in this study, affiliation with religious institutions was one, but not the only, manifestation of their beliefs. The daughters’ religious practices were guided by halakhah, which they accepted wholly rather than selectively. Because both mothers and daughters were committed to Judaism but observed it to a different extent and viewed it differently, there was a common basis for understanding. Furthermore, the mothers knew that their daughters were observing authentic Judaism, and this was a source of pride. Thus, this was not a change in cultural identity or in fundamental theological beliefs.

From the perspective of stress theory, the families’ efforts to maintain cohesion and the influence of rabbis can be viewed as moderating factors that facilitated the adaptation to the stressor of the daughter’s religious intensification. The notion of improvement in family relations despite of growing ambivalence draws attention to the concept of family resilience. Hawley and DeHaan’s (1996) definition of family resilience “as a path a family follows as it adapts and prospers in the face of stress in the present and over time” (p. 298) is also relevant to our findings. Similar to Silliman’s (1994) notion that resilience can be described at individual, family, and community levels, we add that family resilience may be applied to a community of families experiencing similar stressors and is evident in a common paths these families follow as they adapt, both in the present and over time. Hawley and DeHaan argued that resilient families “respond positively in unique ways, depending on the context, developmental level, the interactive combination of risk factors and the shared family outlook” (p. 298). This suggests that families are able to grow and thrive in response to stressors that they adapt to over time at different points of the life cycle and that risk and protective factors can mediate this process. In our case example, the shared family outlook (e.g., maintain the Jewish family), the South Africa context, and protective factors (e.g., the role of rabbis), helped the families in this study to grow, thrive, and adapt cohesively. Walsh (1996) argued for an ecological perspective that takes into account child and adult spheres in risk and resil-
ience. Rutter (1987) admonished that to under-
stand and encourage psychosocial resilience and
protective mechanisms, one must attend to the in-
terplay between what occurs within families and
what occurs in the political economic social and
rational climates in which individuals perish or
thrive. The complex interplay with what was hap-
pening on the adult-child and parent levels and in
the society at large demonstrates the relevance of
the ecological context to the outcome.

Similar to the views in the literature on de-
velopmental aging (Glass et al., 1986), our findings
demonstrate that the relative influence of parents
on children and children on parents changes over
time as children marry and have children, assume
adult roles, and exert reciprocal influences on their
parents. Parents’ changing their lifestyle to follow
their religious children is one example found in
this study. Consistent with the generational stake
theory (Acock & Bengtson, 1971; Bengtson &
Kuypers, 1971), both mother and daughter gen-
erations were invested in maintaining solidarity
and the relational bond, and mothers reported
closer relationships than their daughters did. In
our study, however, the younger generation ex-
pressed a will for separateness by maximizing
continuity with the Judaism of generations pre-
ceding their parents.

Luescher and Pillemer (1998) argued that
“ambivalence” is a preferable organizing concept
at both the social structural and individual level
of intergenerational relations. In their view, the
notion of intergenerational ambivalence would en-
courage investigators to focus on coping rather
than on the causes for disrupted relations. We find
the notion of intergenerational ambivalence par-
ticularly appealing because on one hand, parents
were initially threatened by the changes involved
in “return” and feared that they will disrupt fam-
ily cohesion; on the other hand, over time they
adapted and discovered some positive conse-
quences of this process. The most salient response
of mothers to their daughters’ religious intensi-
fication was ambivalence. More mothers became
ambivalent over time. The main areas of ambival-
ence for the mothers were in the daughters’ fam-
ilies’ social participation, personal appearance,
and economic independence.

The analysis of family relationships according
to most mothers’ perceptions indicates that the
ability to discuss differences openly and the re-
sulting mutual acceptance enabled mothers and
daughters to maintain good relations and even to
improve them. Most of the daughters attributed
the improvement to religious values or to the in-
fluence of rabbis, who based their advocacy of
family solidarity to the Biblical precept to honor
one’s parents. Regardless of the theory mothers
and daughters chose to explain their adaptation,
our results suggest that coping with differences
around a particular issue can stimulate a strength-
ening of family resilience. We found the concepts
of intergenerational relations, ambivalence, cop-
ing with stress, and family resilience helpful in
conceptualizing the positive adaptation of the
family and the remarkable reworking of the rela-
tionship between the ba’alot teshuvah and their
mothers.

Although this study used a small sample of
South African mothers and daughters in which the
daughters became more religiously fervent than
their parents, it does serve as a case example of
how families adapt to the religious intensification
in a specific cultural context. Its overall positive
findings have implications for other societies and
religions with features that are similar to those
studied here. As a beginning effort, it suggests
areas for further investigation in larger studies of
families experiencing a similar phenomenon.
Studies that compare family members’ reactions
and adaptations to adult children’s religious inten-
sification in other religions and cultures would of-
fer additional opportunities to observe how this
process operates. Even though this article focused
on mothers’ reactions and adaptations and mother-
daughter relationships, it noted that changes were
occurring on the family system level. Similar to
Danzger (2000), we found mothers followed their
children, a trend that is the reverse of the expec-
tation that parents are models for their children.
This contrasts adult intergenerational relations
with parent-child relations when children are
small. Future research on religious intensification
in Judaism and other religions should examine its
operation within family systems.

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